



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

WHAT DOES THE ATTACK ON SAUDI ARABIA MEAN? THREATS AND CHALLENGES

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

128

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

**WHAT DOES THE ATTACK ON SAUDI ARABIA MEAN?
THREATS AND CHALLENGES**

128

2019



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2019 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN 978-9941-8-1853-0

The situation in the Middle East has never been calm as the confrontations there have ethno-confessional, ideological and socio-economic foundations. For the rest of the world, this region is extremely interesting largely for its rich natural resources (oil and natural gas). Recently, the number of conflict zones in the Middle East has increased and, most importantly, the military-political situation also became extremely tense.

The latest wave of tensions in the Middle East began on September 14, 2019 when Saudi Arabian oil refinery complex and deposits were attacked and this, naturally, attracted worldwide attention.

Opposing Camps

There are two major camps facing each other in the region. The first camp, we can provisionally call a “pro-American” camp, which is under Washington’s patronage and whose regional leader is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is mainly an amalgamation of Sunni Arab countries - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco.¹ Israel is also considered in this camp. However, due to the latter’s problems with the Arab world, this alliance is less visible on the official level.²

The second camp in the Middle East, also conditionally, is “pro-Russian” and its regional leader is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The camp mainly consists of Shiite countries and pro-Iranian groups³ - Iraq, Assad’s regime in Syria, “Hezbollah”(Arabic - “Party of Allah) in Lebanon, “Hutties” in Yemen, etc.⁴

Iran, especially lately, has established a well-organized pro-Iranian international network throughout the region. This union is also referred as the “axis of resistance” and its aim is to increase Iran’s influence in the region.⁵

For its part, the Sunni-Arab coalition related to Saudi Arabia is also active. The Saudis suspect that Iran is trying to besiege them.

Who supports whom

■ Saudi side ■ Iran side ■ Split* ■ Non-aligned



***Syria:** Govt pro-Iran, opposition pro-Saudi. **Lebanon:** Hezbollah pro-Iran, main Sunni bloc pro-Saudi. **Yemen:** Govt-in-exile pro-Saudi, Houthi rebels pro-Iran

BBC

Source: BBC

It is noteworthy that Iran and Saudi Arabia have absolutely no trust in each other and there is no direct dialogue between them. As a result, regions at the dividing lines between these countries become explosive.⁶

These camps confront each other in various hot spots in the Middle East - Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and even on the territories of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

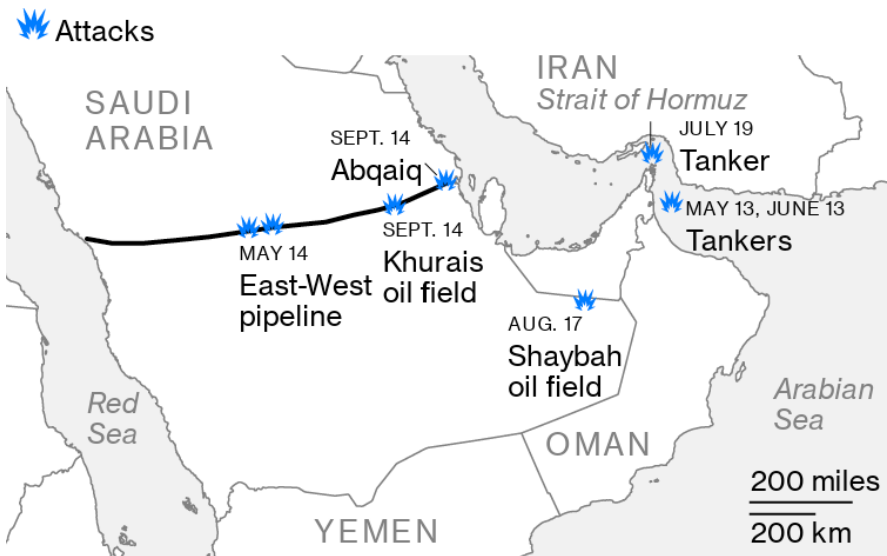
What Does the Recent Attack on Saudi Arabia Mean?

The world oil market largely depends on products supplied by the Saudi-owned giant company, Aramco. The latter, in turn, relies on the potential of the Abqaiq refinery complex (which is processing 6.8 million barrels of

oil per day⁷) where the oil from the Saudi Arabia’s three largest plants - Ghawar, Khurais and Shaybah – is gathered for further processing.⁸

This is precisely the reason why the air strikes on Abqaiq and Khurai on September 14 immediately came under the spotlight of the world community. The attack was perpetrated with the use of 18 low-cost, low altitude so-called “Kamikaze” drones and seven cruise missiles.⁹ As a result of the attacks, Saudi Arabia’s oil production fell by 60% while its supply to the world market dropped by 6%.¹⁰ Consequently, the oil price has risen by 14.7% which is a serious threat to large economies.¹¹

Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for the attack. The Saudi Defense Ministry presented fragments of Iranian-made drones and cruise missiles used in the attack and a spokesman for the ministry, Col. Turki al-Malki, said the attack was “undoubtedly sponsored by Iran.”¹² With this statement, the spokesperson directly linked the attacks on Saudi Arabia to Iran. However, he deliberately did not stipulate the geographical origins of the attacks – were they conducted from the territory of Iran or not. Such a specification would have increased the risk of the direct military confrontation with the Islamic Republic¹³ that, in turn, would have brought devastating consequences upon Saudi Arabia and its allies as well as the entire region.



Source: Bloomberg

It is noteworthy that the United States also blamed Iran for the attacks which further tightened the already severe economic sanctions against Iran on September 20.¹⁴ France, Germany and Great Britain followed the USA. Earlier, Washington also put the blame on Tehran for the May, June, July and August 2019 attacks on oil-tankers in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia's oil pipelines.

Official Tehran itself, through the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, categorically denies its involvement in the incidents.¹⁵ However, the Yemeni affiliated Iranian ally "Houthis" claimed responsibility for the latest attack.¹⁶ The same «Houthis» captured hundreds of Saudi military units in an operation at the Saudi-Yemeni border on September 29.¹⁷ All of this raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the 76.7 billion dollars spent on defense by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2018 (Saudi Arabia ranks third in the world in terms of defense spending after the US and China).¹⁸

Broad Picture

Recent developments have also shown that Iran is a force to be reckoned with and Tehran, despite severe economic sanctions against it, is able to mount serious (including military) resistance.

It was also expected that Iran would somehow respond to the Trump's administrations maximum economic sanctions, Washington's move seeking to subvert Tehran.¹⁹ Tehran has repeatedly pointed out that if it would not be able to trade oil, other countries in the region would not have such a possibility as well. Ultimately, Iran understands the US sanctions as an economic war against it and tries to respond to it in various ways.²⁰

Tehran has a multitude of levers in the Middle East. If necessary, it can significantly complicate the situation - blocking the Strait of Hormuz which will naturally result in the impasse of oil transportation in the Persian Gulf, the activation of the Lebanon based Shiite "Hezbollah" against Israel or the enablement of Shiite military units possibly targeting the US military contingent in Iraq, etc.²¹

From Tehran's perspective, in the current situation, Trump, who has already begun preparations for the 2020 election, will avoid open confrontation of the kind where there is a high probability of the United States and its allies coming to serious harm.²² Therefore, a certain perception arose that if the

Americans (bases, ships and military) were not directly attacked, the US would not respond.²³

Tehran believes that, given these factors, they will be able to defend their positions better in negotiations with the West. They also hope that by upholding such a position, they will persuade the West of the futility of the sanctions imposed against Iran and eventually manage to remove them.²⁴

Unlike Iran, different options are considered in the United States. The first response was that on September 26 the Pentagon announced the deployment of one additional "Patriot" battery system, four radars and 200 personnel to Saudi Arabia. However, it is not yet known whether this force will be added from other Middle Eastern countries to the 500 US troops already deployed in Saudi Arabia or its allocation will happen directly from the United States.²⁵ One important detail to consider here is that the American-made "Patriot" system is designed to neutralize ballistic missiles and not the low-altitude drones and cruise missiles. Moreover, the Saudis already have "Patriot" systems that they did not or could not use to neutralize the September 14 attacks.²⁶

At the same time, a possibility of a cyberattack against Iran is contemplated in the United States. Washington is also considering providing intelligence to Saudi Arabia and its allies in order for the latter to launch retaliatory precision strikes on Iranian oil and gas refineries or Revolutionary Guards Corps bases.²⁷

Saudi Arabia itself has not yet determined what kind of reciprocal steps it wants to take vis-à-vis Iran. It is not clear whether it will respond to Tehran at all as it does not want to provoke new Iranian attacks against the backdrop of defense failures.²⁸

On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir, has said that all options for retaliatory measures against Iran are being considered, including the possibility of military action.²⁹ However, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, has spoken of the catastrophic consequences that could result from a military confrontation with Iran. In particular, he noted: "The region provides the world with 30% of energy supplies ... which is 5%³⁰ of world GDP" and added that the war with Iran would "bring about a complete collapse of the global economy" as oil prices would rise catastrophically on the world market. He also said that "a political and peaceful solution to the conflict is better than a military solution."³¹

In addition, some countries in the Middle East are also contemplating taking up the role of a mediator. If earlier this role was taken up by a largely neutral Oman, this time Iraq's Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, who invited the leaders of the two rival countries to Baghdad for a meeting, is seeking to take over the peacekeeping mission.³²

The main problem, however, is that the United States does not have a clear strategy for the Middle East in general (including Iran). Moreover, Washington has largely used economic pressure to achieve its goals in the form of sanctions which have not yet yielded the desired results. The US also has little or no use of diplomatic, political, cyber, military, intelligence and other means.³³ For example, there is no broad coalition in the international arena that would fully share Washington's vision and policy vis-à-vis Tehran. In such a situation, it is difficult to see a clear path for further progress.

Conclusions:

- The September 14 attacks clearly demonstrated how fragile peace and stability in the Middle East region is;
- This phase of the conflict showed the obvious military superiority of Iran and its allies over Saudi Arabia and its allies;
- Consequently, it is natural that Tehran will now seek to reflect this advantage to strengthen its position both in the Middle East and in the international arena;
- The attacks raised serious questions about the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's air defense systems. It is unlikely that it will be able to defend itself without direct US military assistance;
- The attack also showed how fragile oil prices are on the world market and how much they depend on military-political developments in the Middle East;
- The incidents have shown that the art of combat is changing and improving over time. Among them it appeared that the low-cost low altitude so-called "Kamikaze" drones are quite efficient. Consequently, traditional air defense systems (including "Patriots") need to be adapted to neutralize new threats;

- Large-scale military actions, which may have unintended consequences, are disadvantageous for the parties. So, despite their sharp rhetoric against each other, they still try to avoid a major confrontation that could blow up the entire Middle East region and bring unintended consequences;
- However, one cannot rule out that small incidents of some kind (such as a missile fired out of carelessness at the American military) could escalate into a major undesirable escalation;
- Iran and / or Iran's allies may continue to carry out small-scale precision strikes like these in the future as well. It is important here how threats are assessed as such attacks may be also perceived as threat prevention;
- Iran's second major adversary in the region, Israel, has no time at the moment for an active foreign policy. After the elections a new government has to be formed there (another snap election may be needed due to the lack of a clear winner in the last parliamentary elections). Israel is, therefore, quietly but carefully watching developments in the Persian Gulf at this point;
- A big escalation is dangerous both for the entire Middle East and its neighborhood, including Georgia, as in such circumstances a humanitarian crisis cannot be ruled out which will inevitably lead to a large refugee movement. In that event one cannot dismiss the possibility of radical and terrorist groups activating towards Georgia;
- The ongoing so-called "proxy war" between the two camps in the Middle East (the war conducted locally with the participation of their allies on the ground) cannot be easily ended. The confrontation between them is likely to continue for a long time since neither the actual plan for resolving the conflict situation nor the appropriate political will is present.

Used Literature and Sources:

1. Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "United Arab Emirates," www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/uae
2. www.gfsis.org/files/library/opinion-papers/116-expert-opinion-geo.pdf
3. Zurab Batiashvili, „Only Russia can shoot down its plane and blame other,“ www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/513119-zurab-batiashvili-mxolod-rusets-sheuzlia-chamoagdos-sakutari-tvitmprinavi-da-amashi-sxva-daadanashaulos/
4. www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east
5. Avi Melamed, "Inside the Middle Eastm" New York, 2016, pp. 89-90.
6. Zurab Batiashvili, "Iran-Saudi Arabia: The Great Confrontation in The Middle East", "Expert Opinion", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, #116, 2019, P.4
7. www.english.iswnews.com/7194/breaking-ansar-allah-drone-attacks-on-aramco-oil-facility-deep-inside-the-saudi-arabia/
8. www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/09/19/despite-american-shale-oil-markets-still-rely-on-saudi-arabia
9. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49805591
10. www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/09/19/despite-american-shale-oil-markets-still-rely-on-saudi-arabia
11. www.theguardian.com/business/live/2019/sep/16/oil-price-saudi-arabia-iran-drone-markets-ftse-pound-brexit-business-live
12. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-09-24/iran-testing-trump-administration
13. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/qa-why-did-iran-attack-saudi-arabia
14. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/major-attack-saudi-aramco-leaves-us-difficult-spot-iran-oil-yemen-iraq-military-response
15. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-09-24/iran-testing-trump-administration
16. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49805591
17. www.almasdarnews.com/article/houthi-forces-capture-saudi-army-officers-in-big-attack-along-yemeni-border/
18. www.cNBC.com/2019/09/19/how-saudi-arabia-failed-to-protect-itself-from-drones-missile-attacks.html
19. www.spiegel.de/international/world/usa-saudia-arabia-iran-a-new-conflict-in-the-middle-east-a-1287811.html
20. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-09-24/iran-testing-trump-administration
21. www.spiegel.de/international/world/usa-saudia-arabia-iran-a-new-conflict-in-the-middle-east-a-1287811.html

22. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/major-attack-saudi-aramco-leaves-us-difficult-spot-iran-oil-yemen-iraq-military-response
23. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-09-24/iran-testing-trump-administration
24. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/qa-why-did-iran-attack-saudi-arabia
25. www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/world/middleeast/troops-defense-saudi-pentagon.html
26. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/qa-why-did-iran-attack-saudi-arabia
27. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/qa-why-did-iran-attack-saudi-arabia
28. www.worldview.stratfor.com/article/qa-why-did-iran-attack-saudi-arabia
29. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49836080
30. www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/saudi-arabia-mbs-war-iran-collapse-global-economy-190930011429697.html
31. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/30/saudi-prince-warns-regional-war-iran-could-lead-total-collapse/
32. www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-saudi-arabia-gives-green-light-for-talks-with-iran
33. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-09-24/iran-testing-trump-administration